

CALIFORNIA AGRICULTURE VISION

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on behalf of the California School Nutrition Association

The California School Nutrition Association (CSNA) represents more than six million children where four million breakfast and lunch meals are served daily. Under the guidelines of USDA's National School Lunch Program, a critical function of the program is "to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities." Both Federal and State regulations mandate that participating schools shall ensure that children gain a full understanding of the relationship between proper eating and good health.

What is CSNA's vision for Agriculture in 2030?

CSNA envisions a much stronger linkage with its agricultural providers in order to achieve the objectives set forth by the new Farm Bill. For this to happen, California agriculture must view itself as advocate partners of school nutrition providers, and not merely vendors. We envision a seamless, vertically integrated food system that maximizes government efficiencies from farm to fork and utilizes schools as the primary access point for the community's nutrition education and its better understanding of agriculture and the role it plays in health. The 2008 Farm Bill also envisions American Agriculture and schools working in concert for these purposes.

There is a need to educate agricultural providers. School food service is one of the single largest customers of California's agricultural products, yet the average farmer, rancher, dairyman, or fisherman knows nothing of our needs or how to market their products to us. We have specific portion, pricing and packaging requirements that they would gladly meet if providers viewed school nutrition as a viable customer set.

There is a need for nutritious new product development. The new Farm Bill allocates an increase of \$1.02 billion for the USDA Snack Program, which helps schools provide healthy snacks to students during after-school activities and will expand the current program to all 50 states. We need our agricultural providers and commodity organizations to develop these healthy snack foods in forms that are allowable in schools and in products that kids will eat. Schools will be more

than happy to spend \$1.02 billion on nutritious, agricultural-based products if they are developed.

We envision stronger nutrition education programs permanently institutionalized in schools that utilize the school meal programs as their centerpiece. We further envision a logical foundation for these nutrition education programs to be provided by agricultural marketing orders that have the ability to invest in nutrition education for their respective products. The dairy industry has been a model for years of voluntary nutrition education in schools.

The 2008 Farm Bill requires USDA to allow schools and other institutions receiving funds under the National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Acts to use geographic preference for the procurement of “unprocessed agricultural products, both locally-grown and locally-raised” [Sec.4302]. If, in fact, California schools had an ideal relationship with their agricultural providers, it is possible that we could maximize the Farm Bill’s intent to create significant customer relationships with California agriculture and innovate direct purchasing and surplus removal programs that would benefit schools.

The recent Westlands Beef Administrative Recall emphasized the need for an improved communication plan that immediately alerts school food service of issues related to food safety as it pertains to agricultural products. The current process is heavily reliant upon private-sector distributor providers to notify their school customers. Alternately, USDA notifies the California Department of Education who then is charged with notifying schools. A real-time, direct communication from the Department of Agriculture to food service directors could cut the communication time by up to 24 hours—24 critical hours when food safety is the issue.

So, what will be the biggest challenges in achieving this vision?

First, inadequate funding of school nutrition programs. If the proper nutrition of Americans and the reduction of obesity and obesity-related disease is truly a national priority (as the 2008 Farm Bill indicates), then funding school nutrition programs must be prioritized appropriately. CSNA envisions that CDFA and California agriculture in its entirety will support California’s schools in gaining appropriate funding for school meals, which are in large part comprised of California’s agricultural products. While the public increasingly expects schools to serve fresh fruits and vegetables in school meal programs, funding is a barrier to the purchasing of the products, the equipment to safely serve and store it, and the labor needed to handle it.

California food and labor costs are higher than most states. The new Farm Bill indexes funding for other nutrition programs such as food stamps, and California schools critically need a more appropriate method of calculating funding that includes economic factoring and indexing. In fact, we cannot wait to fund school meals in California appropriately if we are to achieve the nation's prioritized goals of reducing childhood obesity and obesity-related disease if we are expected to continue to weather food and labor cost increases based on the current archaic formulas. Our state's children desperately need the political power of California agriculture to advocate on their behalf.

The second challenge is the complex nature of school nutrition programs. Our programs are reliant on a huge spectrum of government agencies and private enterprise in order to feed children. Additionally, they are subject to the requirements of multiple agencies and local school boards for standards. This burden of complexity adds cost and inefficiency to the system and can create barriers to innovation. Moreover, a common complaint from agriculture is that they a) don't know who the purchasing authority is; b) don't know how to sell to schools; c) in many cases, believe all foods served in schools are commodity surpluses; d) don't know that they could responsibly market their agricultural products on school campuses, reaping long-term consumer benefits.

The third challenge will be maximization of the CDFA role in food and nutrition. CSNA believes California agriculture would benefit greatly from a closer relationship with schools. The benefits could include increased sales in schools, the education of future consumers on the nutritional benefits of agricultural products, greater utilization of nutrition programs by low-income citizens, and the larger mission of improving the well-being of Californians.

In summary, CSNA is optimistic that the next 20+ years will bring a closer relationship between schools and the California Department of Food and Agriculture (and its constituent base), increasing government efficiency and reducing waste. Moreover, an improved alignment of mutual goals will bring our state closer to being able to achieve the objectives set forth in the 2008 Farm Bill, which creates the expectation to improve the nation's health and well-being with better nutrition in homes and in schools.